

STAT

APR 1982  
68WASHINGTON POST MAGAZINE  
11 JULY 1982

# The Secret Files Of Mr. X

BY CHARLES FENYVESI

It's 3 a.m. one morning this summer and the hotline linking the White House to the Kremlin has a brief, urgent message.

National Security Adviser William Clark is alerted. In three minutes he is dressed, and in another three minutes a black limousine zips him from his apartment building to the White House, 10 blocks away. He rushes to the bedroom of the president and reads the message from Moscow: "Leonid Brezhnev is dead. Konstantin Chernenko is general secretary."

"What do we know about Chernenko?" asks Ronald Reagan.

Up to this point, the scenario is hypothetical. But the fact is that whoever is going to take the place of Brezhnev—75, ailing for years and almost certain to leave office soon by death or retirement—his biographical sketches are ready: one prepared in the State Department, the other in the CIA. The authors are two Kremlinologists known as "the men with the best shoeboxes in town." They are specialists in the Soviet Communist elite, a glum cabal of paper shufflers and fat generals.

The State Department's man is a cartoonist's image of a federal bureaucrat: frail, bespectacled, with a preference for dark suits, white shirts and inconspicuous ties that never

change width. He chooses his words with excruciating prudence, and the minute details of his speciality absorb him totally. He is horrified by the idea that he will be mentioned in the press, and he insists on anonymity. So we'll call him Mr. X.

Mr. X's office is at a dead end of the labyrinth of State Department corridors. Its off-white walls, which could use another coat of paint, are decorated with organizational charts of the Soviet state and party. Towering file cabinets take up two-thirds of his floor space, a forest of every shade from khaki to bilious green that the government has chosen over the past half-century as its color of the moment.

His desk is blanketed with stacks of Soviet newspapers, clippings and files. Next to his telephone is a directory of the Supreme Soviet, their equivalent of the U.S. Congress. Each member has about 50 words of a biography and a low-quality, retouched photograph. The directory is printed in a few thousand copies, Mr. X says, and is extremely difficult to obtain.

On a ledge behind his desk are his famous shoeboxes. They are two gray cardboard boxes, 8 inches by 10 inches, 5 inches deep, and each box contains about 800 index cards.

"Our system is cheap and fast," Mr. X says, with a shy smile, and he hands over the two boxes to a visitor. The cards are alphabetical. On each card is the career history of a Soviet official, as gathered from public Soviet sources, typed in English or translated

ated Russian: schools attended, jobs held, awards received, articles published. Nothing about family, hobbies, interests. That kind of data comes from debriefed defectors and the diplomatic grapevine and is therefore classified, stored in the file cabinets.

The craft Mr. X practices calls for a painstaking culling and inspired linking of pieces of information published over decades. "Some 85 percent of the knowledge any Kremlinologist needs is in the public domain," says a colleague of Mr. X's. "What the profession requires is an encyclopedic memory and lucky hunches." Kremlinologists are rated on their track record of detecting developments—an art that has been called "predicting the past."

For instance, in 1980, the leading contenders to succeed Brezhnev—Chernenko and Andrei Kirilenko—published books, each titled *Selected Speeches and Articles*. Pravda reviewed the books. But as a careful check by Mr. X's office revealed, only Chernenko's book was reviewed—and praised extravagantly—in the press of the non-Russian socialist republics that together with Russia make up the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The conjecture that Mr. X reported was that Kirilenko, No. 2 throughout the 1970s, is slipping, and Chernenko is headed to take his place.

CONTINUED

Charles Fenyvesi is a staff writer for *The Washington Post Magazine*.